

An Unspeakable Sadness: the Dispossession of the Nebraska Indians

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These suggestions do not detract from a fine, readable introduction to Danish emigration and immigration.

An Unspeakable Sadness: The Dispossession of the Nebraska Indians, by David J. Wishart. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995. xv, 309 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, notes, bibliography, index. \$50.00 cloth.

REVIEWED BY MICHAEL L. TATE, UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA

Nineteenth-century American history is partially defined by the dispossession of Native American peoples. During recent decades, the increased public awareness of broken treaties, cultural imperialism, and tragic Indian wars has led to a general understanding of the failure of federal Indian policy. However, the public's knowledge of the precise details of these failures has been confined to a few celebrated cases whose stories are reiterated time and again without any new insights. For the majority of smaller tribes, and especially for those who did not participate in the colorful "Indian wars," public understanding has not kept pace. The publication of a solid study of four tribes within a single region that delineates the precise details of four separate dispossessions is indeed a cause for celebration.

David Wishart uses the cross-disciplinary tools of a cultural geographer to trace the gradual erosion of the population, power, and land base for the Omahas, Pawnees, Poncas, and Otoe-Missouria between 1800 and 1890. He describes the tribes' lifestyles and material cultures at the beginning of the nineteenth century to demonstrate how well they had integrated technological changes into their "traditional" cultures. But the demographic disasters gradually brought on by epidemics, changes in established trade networks, and a heightened intensity of warfare undermined each of the tribes. Wishart addresses how the native peoples made rational adjustments to the rapidly changing world, but they were overwhelmed by what Omaha chief Big Elk described in 1854 as a "flood" of white people coming from the East.

An Unspeakable Sadness captures all the pathos and deceit endemic to the age, but it does not accept stereotypical prejudgments about Indians as passive victims or as heroic warriors resisting every aspect of European-American life. On the contrary, each tribe profited initially from its entry into the fur trade, gained some benefits of amity and commerce from the earliest treaties, and received competent treatment from some agents.

Yet the passage of the 1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act and the attendant treaties signed during the same decade hastened the tribes' demise. Already racked by the factionalism that came out of the fur trade era,

and greatly dependent on federal annuities, the tribes were compelled to surrender vast tracts of Nebraska land in the 1850s. Their restriction to relatively small reservations left them without the resources to maintain viable economies just at the time that the traditional buffalo hunt was coming to an end. Subsequent withdrawals of certain lands from these already diminished reservations during the 1870s and 1880s spelled further hardship, as did the well-intentioned but disastrous allotment of the Omaha Reservation in 1882. During the 1870s the Pawnees, Poncas, and Otoe-Missouria were forcibly removed from Nebraska to present-day Oklahoma. Disease, purloined annuities, and general discouragement made adjustment to the new lands exceedingly difficult. Even the valiant efforts of Ponca leader Standing Bear to return with a small band of followers to his ancestral lands on the Niobrara River met only limited success.

David Wishart has melded together the intricate twists and turns of four tribal histories in a way that is true to the highest academic standards and yet understandable among the broadest of reading audiences. Likewise, his forty-page section of endnotes, drawn mostly from archival and ethnographic sources, speaks well of the scholarly thoroughness of his research. Never forgetting that Native Americans are the focus of this study, Wishart avoids the trap of some scholars who merely describe a litany of federal policies and call it "Indian history." His determination to provide a spatial interpretation of events led him to include several dozen excellent maps and charts to document the dispossession process. Finally, his discussion of the Indian Claims Commission's handling of these tribes' land cases updates the story to our own times.

This is truly a classic study in Native American and frontier history. It is well worth the comparatively high price, but I hope that the University of Nebraska Press will soon release a paperback edition so that the book can receive wider use in the classroom and among the general reading public.

Neither Wolf Nor Dog: American Indians, Environment, and Agrarian Change, by David Rich Lewis. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994. x, 240 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY JAMES W. OBERLY, UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-EAU CLAIRE

Neither Wolf Nor Dog is a splendid book that represents the best in current ethnohistorical writing. David Rich Lewis has closely studied the forced transition to agriculture among one well-known Indian group, the Northern Utes of the Great Basin, and two more obscure

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